Office of the President

“Language, Policy, and Social Change,” Monterey Keynote, October 2015

October 1, 2015

Dean Dayton-Johnson, deans, center directors, trustees, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends: It is delightful to see you all here. I began our journey together last February with a story about government policy and language from 1984 in the city of Varanasi, India. I noted at the time that Monterey was my first visit as president-elect; here again now, Monterey is my first stop in the inauguration festivities! When meeting you last February, I began to listen for the things that make Middlebury Institute at Monterey more deeply itself, and the things that faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends want to work on for the future. And in that listening, I found that you frequently mentioned three words: language, policy, and social change. I visited you last month and proposed these three words as a way of describing the collective work we do, and I hear that you have been debating whether they are the right words to capture the spirit of the whole. This is exactly what I hoped for—an open, ongoing debate about intellectual identity. I welcome alternatives and hope that the debate continues!

So I am going to tell you another story from India, about those three things. It is not from many years ago, not an old example of an enduring dilemma. Rather it is a new example—something that happened only this past June, and in the company of a young person who is the age of many of our students here. I was traveling with my niece Caitlyn in Maharashtra, India. I wanted to introduce her to the best women of their generation—activists who had started a women’s documentation and resource center called Aalocana. The staff at Aalocana had just embarked on a training course for women in villages all around the state. The government of India had created a new policy of 30 percent reservation of seats for women, reaching all the way down to the five-

person village councils, called pancayats. Even in the most rural village, women would comprise a third of these village councils. So Caitlyn and I accompanied the staff of Aalocana to work on a training session. The idea was to empower women as representatives on the village council: teach them to stand up for their own perspectives—not be intimidated by people who might belittle them—and to speak about issues that were important to them. The training of that day consisted of reading the story about the first Muslim woman train conductor in India, and how she managed to survive in the midst of a very difficult professional environment. Our visit was hailed as a sign of international support for the training and the village. I spoke Hindi, Caitlyn spoke only English, and most of the women only spoke Marathi. So interpretation was needed.

The women asked us what hardships we had suffered and how we overcame them. My niece was a first-time visitor to India. She leaned over to me and said that she really didn't think she had much to share given the life of privilege she led compared to the women waiting expectantly before her. Then she realized that she did indeed have a story. She said to them, "I have been thinking about the ways you have said that you feel you are in a no-win situation. I too was once in a no-win situation. I was a woman wrestler on the high school wrestling team." The women at first did not understand that she could have been a wrestler. She is slight and fair and does not look like a wrestler. But we translated the word several times into Marathi, and they understood that she was telling the truth. I also added that we had visited the god Hanuman, the god of wrestlers, at a local gym in Mumbai just the day before. So once they understood Caitlyn as a devotee of Hanuman, they lit up and began to laugh. Caitlyn went on to tell them that she really had a no-win situation on her hands as the only female wrestler on her high school wrestling team. She said, "If a guy won against me, then it didn't really count because I was in his eyes just a girl. And if a guy lost to me then it was humiliating because I was a girl. So there was no way out. If I won it was bad for them and if I lost it was also bad for them." The whole village courtyard burst out in applause and laughter at this story. This was a wonderful example of translatability—the theme of our panel today.

At one point in our conversations that day, discussion of empowerment of women was getting nowhere because they felt their domestic concerns were far greater than anything that confronted them in the village council. And women's empowerment as a phrase is not truly translatable, given that the word for female power, Shakti, has deeply traditional connotations about women in the home. However, translatability emerged when the stories started to flow about no-win situations that women found themselves in. The monkey god Hanuman also came to the rescue!

I share this story because it is a compelling one from a few months ago. What is more, it illustrates the major values of Monterey and how needed the training that Monterey gives its students is in the world of 2015. To put it simply, and I will return to this point again and again, the Monterey perspective on translatability (whether it is through language learning, entrepreneurship, activism, policy work, or other forms of social change) dwells in that ethical space between the all too easy and the impossible.

Let me elaborate on this in terms of translation studies and a very helpful analysis from two Nigerian scholars, Moruwawon and Kolawole Samuels, who work at the University of Ido Akiti in the Department of French. They explain that there are three approaches to translatability. The first is the universal approach, which claims the existence of linguistic universals. Any differences that exist between languages are not obstacles to translation. This is due to the fact that every community can verbalize and has the potential to verbalize even extra-linguistic nuances, like cultures and social contexts. As Walter Benjamin also writes, “Languages are not strangers to one another.”

There are times when this approach can turn into a longing for codes and formulae, such as happened in the story our guest panelist and my friend, Peter Burian, recently told me. In that story, Peter’s international student in ancient Greek was convinced there was a series of set formulae for translating the ancient classics, and kept wondering why Peter was keeping the secret from him. This might be universalism gone awry.

The second approach is the “monadist” approach. It argues that each linguistic community perceives and interprets reality in its own particular way, and this fact undermines translatability. The worlds in which different societies live are indeed distinct worlds, and the terms are specific to each community and develop according to each culture’s linguistic codes. There is for many who espouse this view very little correspondence between two languages. Thus, the art of translation will always have to cope with the basic reality of untranslatability. This is why translation has often been characterized as “betrayal” in the play on words in Italian between *traduttore* and *traditore* – a comment many of us have heard many times in translation seminars.

Finally there is a third approach—what the Samuels duo calls the deconstructionist approach, and I call the transformational approach. It argues for a mutual change in the process of translation. Translating a language not only affects the language into which it is translated, the target

language, but also affects the way in which the original language, the source language, is perceived. And thus the process of translation is constantly also modifying both languages. Translatability is a process of mutual modification. These scholars conclude that a perfect translation, i.e., one that does not involve loss of information from the original, is unattainable. They argue instead that a practical approach to translatability must accept that an evaluation of potential losses and gains in every act of translation has to be carried out.

This approach seems to me to be a wonderful middle path and a way that we might think about for Monterey in the future. In the 21st-century practice of translation, interpretation, and the work of language in the world, Monterey knows that the power of language is at the core of human relationships. That means that language can drive social change in a way that very few other things can. This is a brave and ethical stance in a world where it can sometimes seem that computational language, and not human language, provides the basis for all of our social interactions. Language drives change and the more humans can master language the more social change and better policies there will be in the world. What is more, Monterey students, faculty, and staff understand that we move between all three kinds of translatability all the time. There are times when it seems impossible to translate good policy into the world—too complex, too risky. There are times when people might think it seems all too easy: “Why wouldn’t everyone sign on to this, if we could only communicate it clearly?” And yet the Monterey community has proven time and again that both views can be mistaken. Monterey people live every day in the moments when we realize that, if we sit and do the hard work for literate social change, we can dwell in the in-between space where we change each other.

I think of a story told to me by Bill Potter at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies as a particular example of the Monterey approach to the question of translatability. It involves the journey from a universalist view of translation, to a monadist view, to one that included a back-and-forth negotiation where both parties were changed. One student who studied Russian and nonproliferation at Monterey then got a job at the Los Alamos national laboratory and was involved in a cooperative threat-reduction program. On one of his first missions to Russia as part of the U.S. team, the U.S. group found it impossible to establish any rapport with the Russian interlocutors. They made little headway in developing a cooperative plan for enhancing nuclear security at the Russian site. One evening after dinner after a particularly unproductive set of meetings, our Monterey graduate decided to recite some of Pushkin’s poems, which he had learned in a class at Monterey. The Russians were flabbergasted that an American not only could

speak excellent Russian but also knew their beloved Pushkin by heart. They embraced him as a friend, not a U.S. negotiator, and the next day the two sides hammered out a mutually satisfactory agreement. Thanks to him, the negotiation was no longer seen as a
"we" versus "they" proposition.

Think about this story in terms of the approaches to translatability that we just outlined. It began perhaps even before the negotiation, with the high hopes that nonproliferation could be an intelligible policy in a Russian-U.S. negotiation. In the initial expectations of our Monterey graduate, this was supposed to take place in the universally translatable nonproliferation negotiation. Instead what the Monterey graduate encountered was the opposite: the monadist approach, where no common ground could actually be the basis for an agreement. Nothing was translatable even if the two sides comprehended each other's language. But then, after the appearance of an American reciting Pushkin, there was a change and we moved to what we have called the transformational approach to translation, where both sides were modified in their perspectives. One side understood that cultural appreciation was the only way that they could truly communicate and they did so. The other side understood that their opponent actually could have an appreciation for the Russian soul. And in this way the mutual forming of a treaty could occur. There was a movement from a naïve expectation of total translatability, to the disappointment of untranslatability in the throes of a tough negotiation, to mutual change as a result of a shift in the frame. Or, to put it more simply, Pushkin to the rescue!

And there are other stories that show the power of different kinds of translatability at Monterey. One involves 2010 graduate Sarah Irene, mentioned to me by Renee Jourdenais and Laura Burian. Sarah works at the UN in the English booth, interpreting from Russian and French. She was one of four people chosen out of hundreds to become one of the UN's core interpreter staff. She is at the white-hot center of global politics every day and she knows it. As a recent piece on Sarah puts it, she is keenly aware of the sensitive nature of the material she interprets and the razor-thin margin for error that is a fact of life and her job. She says, "I work often on the Security Council and have personally seen tensions arise between Russia and the U.S. and Western Europe over the past year or so. This in turn impacts my experience as an interpreter, as every communication is more charged with emotion, every turn of phrase more significant. I simply cannot get anything wrong—there's too much at stake." So Sarah is moving between the languages of the history makers of the world, and witnessing history as it is made. She is also keenly aware of her moral responsibility to get the words right so that the world can stay stable.

Sarah knows that there are some things that are impossible to translate perfectly, and other things that are easy to translate. This knowledge does not stop her from working hard when it is easy and patiently persisting when it is not. She too, like our Pushkin-reciting friend, exists in the space between total translatability and no translatability—the ethical place where both sides accept mutual transformation even in the imperfect translation.

In addition we have those Monterey moments when there is unexpected translatability. In these cases, the work of the students in the classroom is immediately recognizable as something that can help the world. Here is a story Peter Shaw told me: Laura Preston, a student from GSIPM, learned about a curriculum project during an internship at a private school in Cameroon. After the internship, she decided to partner with a middle school science teacher in Salinas and created a project where both schools would implement an environmental science curriculum called Project WET (Water Education for Teachers). Students at both schools would share their learning online. And in addition, there is an ESL component to the class so that non-English speakers can understand the scientific content. Free training is given for teachers through the Museum of Natural History in Pacific Grove, and several MIIS teachers went through the training. And Laura is back in Cameroon and collaborating with the school where she originally had the idea. There is a lot of mutual impact in this story. Or you can hear about the surprise translatability of the project of Alan Lovewell in the IEP program and the social venture he started called Real Good Fish. Lyuba mentioned to me that Alan made a video in a class at Monterey five years ago and interviewed fishermen who felt that regulations were getting in the way of their livelihood. In his video he combined the suffering of the local fishing community with the concern for the global fish crisis. And he began to work on a business model whereby local fishing could not only be sustainable but help to regenerate fisheries. He just won a $100,000 grant from Chase, where there were thousands of applicants and only a few were selected. Here too his work was surprisingly translatable into the world around him.

So these are just a few of the many examples whereby Monterey students and faculty live in between the extremes of universal translatability, which does not recognize the particularities of culture and context, and no translatability, which gives into despair that any form of social change can occur. Instead Monterey people live in the place where standards remain high, but social change remains the ethical mandate. That is the place in between that allows for mutual transformation of the translator and the translated. This is where the Monterey soul resides.

So how do we move forward together knowing how to exist and grow in this ethical space in between? I would like to suggest three particular ways in which we can begin to move forward in this next stage of our life together as the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

First, we need to do a better job of translating translatability in our own backyard. Last month I listened to each of you talk about the relationship between programs and between your multiple values. You all noted that there were many separate tracks at Monterey and these tracks were difficult to maintain and to build bridges across. And yet when I asked you to tell me stories about connections, you had them at the ready. You told me enthusiastically about times when your programs go together, and do so in a vibrant and life-changing way.

It seems then, first and foremost, that you need to tell each other stories across your distances—distances that may have been inadvertently built but are nonetheless keenly felt. So the internal process of finding commonalities across programs is the first task at Monterey. We might call it the task of internal translatability.

Second, this combination of foci is something that allows us a unique perspective on social change. We learn languages at Monterey for a reason—to make the world better. And we learn policy at Monterey for a reason—to speak social change in the world, whatever shape it may take. We are entrepreneurs at Monterey not simply for profit, but because there is some form of value the world needs that we can provide. We need to translate this intellectual identity to the larger world. We need to translate ourselves better into other people's hearts and minds. I call this the challenge of the translatability of our mission. It must be a clear mission and, stated simply and uniquely, it must be a mission whereby we see, and the world sees clearly, how Middlebury Institute at Monterey can uniquely lead. We might call our mission "literate social change"—the place where language, environmental work, policy, development, entrepreneurship, and mediation all meet and make each other so much more effective.

Third, we need to feature the deeply compelling pedagogy that is Monterey's signature. I heard from you that you have been working hard on curricular creativity, and I'm greatly excited to hear the results. I also heard last month that some Monterey folks actually had presented a particular kind of pedagogy at several conferences but did not have the time or energy to follow up on this. It is time now with new leadership, with Middlebury 100 percent behind you, to make the Monterey

method something much more than a few presentations at conferences. If curriculum is part of our creativity, then pedagogy cannot be far behind.

As the Real Good Fish project shows, your classroom projects change the world even before they leave the classroom. Or, as I was inspired to say in my last visit to you, Monterey is the place where you don't have to wait for your education to make a difference in the world. This is one of the most exciting forms of intellectual identity that we could develop as we move together into the next decade of the 21st century.

So my blueprint for us is threefold: 1) Internal translatability—a big project that will give Monterey more coherence and better arguments to improve our intellectual lives together; 2) Mission translatability—so that the world does not only see a series of international degree programs but rather a profound commitment to the mutual interactions between our programs to create literate social change; 3) Pedagogical translatability—the ownership of our particular method of teaching that imagines students will be colleagues as soon as they finish the class—or even before. This approach means that the classroom itself is a laboratory for social change, and such a laboratory can be a wonderful contribution Monterey can make to the world.

Internal translatability, mission translatability, and pedagogical translatability are my three challenges to us as we embark on our lives together. I will help—in garnering resources, in creating intellectual synergies, and in hiring the best possible faculty for the work ahead.

Earlier you heard me talk about the soul of Monterey. I once heard that one of my role models, Hannah Gray, president of the University of Chicago, visited another illustrious university and asked the president there if his university had a soul. I gather she wasn't impressed with the place and felt that she had to ask. The president couldn't actually say anything to describe its soul. It is a wonderful question to ask of ourselves: does Monterey have a soul? And it is clear to me that it does, and it must be described anew—story by story, student by student, and classroom by classroom. It is about a unique experience shaped by our multilingual community, the bringing together of like-minded students, the curriculum, and the faculty (most of whom have real-life experience.) It is about that moving moment that Beryl Levinger told me about, where one discovers in a Monterey classroom that everyone has experience living and working and being creative in a country with scarce resources.

We might return now to the story of my niece Caitlyn's village visit. She had a Monterey moment when she realized that her experience was translatable, even though she had previously thought it was impossible to connect. And that moment will last a lifetime. As she told me, she learned more in that afternoon than she did in a semester's worth of classroom work.

Monterey's soul dwells in that space between a falsely optimistic globalism and the despair of never truly gaining cross-cultural understanding. MIIS students thrive where human relationships thrive and where social change is possible. And that social change is possible simply because we have had the courage to imagine it, to learn the language in which it might occur, and to create the policy by which we might live into a new world. And in doing so, we might even create new languages and new narratives that can provide models for us as actors in the world. The Monterey soul is that ethical space in between, where reciprocal translatability is the best hypothesis for living; we know it is possible and necessary, even in all of its imperfections. Let us live there together.

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Office Hours - Spring 2023
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